

The Short Story

All the civilizations that have ever existed have told stories. Story-telling is as much a part of human nature as walking on two legs.

Science is a collection of stories. What is the criterion for whether or not a story belongs to the 'science' category?

Religions are also collections of stories. What defines that category?

History is a collection of stories. "History is stories, mostly lies, about kings, mostly villains, and soldiers, mostly fools." ~ Mervyn Peake. "History is that account of the past acceptable to a given group of people at a given time" ~ Winston Churchill.

We view our own life and the lives of others as stories. We cannot escape narrative. All language, even the cry of a newly-born baby, is intended to tell a story. We love telling and listening to stories. They can be told (or written) well or badly. Creating a story is a craft as much as it is an art.

Do you have a favourite short story? What do you like about it?

Different types of short story: Adventure, Romance, Crime, Erotic, Horror, Comic, Didactic (teaches a lesson, e.g. a parable or morality tale), Fairytale, Supernatural, Science Fiction, Fantasy, 'True Life', Essay, Historical ... there are probably many others. Song lyrics frequently tell a story (examples).

I can talk about only one kind of story: 'Literary' short stories. What does that mean? Not a formal category, might mean different things to different people. My definition:

- Character led. What happens is the result of voluntary human action with motives that may be hidden but are not non-existent. Not the result of chance or random natural events.
- The story aims primarily at affecting the emotions of the reader. Whatever techniques it may use are directed to this end. Not primarily (for example) a puzzle to be solved or a comedy.
- Deals with significant material, often morally interesting or ambiguous, leaving the reader with things to consider after they have read it.
- Makes use of subtle techniques such as subtext, metaphor and atmosphere.
- Pays heed to elegance of language and presentation.

Victorian (and older) stories versus modern stories. (one example of each).

Main elements that make up a story: the characters, the plot, the tense (past, present, future), the POV (point of view), whether first, second or third person narration, the 'voice'*, and the 'technicalities': e.g. spelling, grammar, use of commas, quotation marks and the like. You are in control of all of these.

* The term 'voice' has two senses: the writer's individual style, and whether 'active' or 'passive' voice is used.

What makes a story good?

- At least one character that you care about
- 'Show', don't 'Tell'
- Appropriate pace
- Appropriate length
- No waffle. Every word should count
- Intriguing opening
- Realistic dialogue
- Just enough description, not too much or too little
- Non-intrusive style (not flowery or pretentious)
- A satisfying ending that gives a sense of completion and unity to the story

What What makes a story bad?

- Slow or banal beginning: "It was a dark and stormy night..."
- 'One dimensional' characters
- Too many characters introduced too soon
- Excessively long sentences
- Wandering off the point (every word should count)
- Too much unnecessary description or other material
- Over-complicated plot
- Ending that's too abrupt or too drawn-out

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